

# REVIEWS

## **A Poverty of Reason: Sustainable Development and Economic Growth**

**Wilfred Beckerman**

*The Independent Institute, Oakland, 2003*

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and

## **Re-Thinking Green: Alternatives to Environmental Bureaucracy**

**Edited by Carl P. Close and Robert Higgs**

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US \$22.95, softcover, 480 p.

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The Independent Institute is a ‘Think Tank’, a title that suggests a gathering of brains calmly solving the pressing issues of the day by means of deep, unbiased ratiocination. In fact, this type of organization arose to a troubling ubiquity in North America largely as the result of a strategy devised in the United States as long ago as the 1960s. The plan was to channel money from interested parties towards organizations and individuals supportive of conservative policies and causes. A right-wing bent is commonly flagged in the names that Think Tanks acquire, typical code-words being Freedom, Enterprise, Heritage and Independence. It would be satisfying to provide an equivalent list for left-wing Think Tanks, but the statistical sample is so small that the task is beyond the

reach and ingenuity of at least this disinterested observer.

The Independent Institute states that it “expands the frontiers of our knowledge of public policy issues and fosters new and effective directions for government reform” [<http://www.independent.org/aboutus/>]. It claims that it accomplishes this laudable ambition “(t)hrough uncommon independence, depth, and clarity”. I did not know what to make of “uncommon” independence, but fortunately a colleague sent me to another website [<http://www.urielw.com/deception2.htm>] where I found relevant information taken from the article *Unbiased Ads for Microsoft Came at a Price* by Uriel Wittenberg, originally published in the New York Times of September 18, 1999. Wittenberg writes that in May 1998, The Independent Institute purchased ads in the New York Times and the Washington Post in support of Microsoft. Nowhere do the ads reveal that Microsoft provided \$153,868.67 to pay for them. The US Department of Justice had charged Microsoft with illegally thwarting competition to protect and extend its monopoly on software. I would agree therefore, that the claim in the Institute’s puff-piece that their independence is “uncommon”, is entirely justified.

The take-home lesson is obvious. In approaching books and articles from Think Tanks (currently a copious flood that rises like a Bay of Fundy tide) be skeptical about claims of a lack of bias. Begin by looking for the socio-political agenda. In the present case, the litany appears to be: Get government bureaucracy off our backs. Unfettered capitalism allows for continuous growth, and that leads to prosperity for all. There will always be enough resources to go round, because when nature runs

out, we will invent alternatives.

Furthermore, do not swallow the scare stories of environmental activists; they represent an ever present threat to our democratic freedoms.

Beckerman’s is by far the better of the two books. It is well written and presents its right-wing message with admirable brevity, clarity, and more than a little wit. He takes what might be called the Julian Simon position – an ever growing human population means more brains solving more problems, as life continues to improve, for ever. “There is no physical limitation on the growth of this capital” says Beckerman (p. 17). Deconstruct “no physical limitation” and we are into the earthly paradise of “no-limits”, where neo-classical economists play their solipsistic games. Therein, carrying capacity, ecological overshoot and diminishing resources, are left wing plots at worst, and at best, a siren song to which we should block our ears.

A resource that Beckerman specifically draws attention to is the Alberta tar sands. It is almost universally taken for granted that it will save us from freezing in the dark for a long time, when oil and gas are no longer economically exploitable. It probably will, in the relative short term. The problem is that it is a higher entropy resource than oil and gas, and therefore, requires more energy for its extraction. It is in the nature of things that we first use up the lower entropy resources, the so-called “low hanging fruit”, and then, if we are to maintain a particular quality of life, the financial, and thermodynamic costs increase. This presents no immediate problem for the haves, but it is a mounting problem for the have-nots and an ultimate problem for us all.

A truly interesting aspect of *A Poverty of Reason* is Beckerman’s rejection

of ‘Sustainable Development’, that *ignis fatuus* of the late twentieth century. This deeply flawed concept is usually attacked, if indeed it is attacked at all, from the liberal side of the political spectrum. Only there do you occasionally find a sympathetic consideration of the ecologists’ scientific criticisms of the idea. By contrast, opportunistic conservatives realized early on that this was a bandwagon they could leap on. What makes it useful to propagandists of all stripes is that Sustainable Development can be defined and redefined in enough ways to suit any desired pattern of material exploitation. For Beckerman, however, the notion threatens the continuing growth of the economy by recognizing limits to the human exploitation of the planet. To a man of Beckerman’s cast of mind, it seems little more than a devious way of resurrecting the ideas expressed by the Club of Rome in *Limits to Growth*. Conservatives believed that they had said goodbye to all that, and left the body bleeding and moribund, some thirty years ago.

‘Green’ is another term with enough elastic flexibility to gladden the hearts of dissembling merchants everywhere. It is now attached indiscriminately to almost any product for sale in the markets of the developed world. A “green” designation is money in the bank to the entrepreneur. If, for example, it can be attached to jumbo shrimps from the devastated mangrove-lands of southeast Asia, we can be fooled into feeling virtuous as we conspicuously consume the biosphere. Without doubt, as the title of *Re-Thinking Green* suggests, it is a label that would benefit from some rigorous re-examination.

However, the principal type of *rigour* that the book inspires is the type known as *mortis*. Granted that a multi-authored work inevitably lacks uniformity in writing and exposition, what eventually grinds the reader down is the almost unrelenting message that government means bureaucracy and that environmental bureaucracy in particular, is pernicious in the extreme. Bureaucracy driven by environmental thinking apparently leads only to a “gigantic present sacrifice of freedom, human dignity, and material welfare” so that we are in real danger of being “stampeded by environmental terrors on every hand” and of “plunging over the cliff into totalitarian-

ism” (Jaqueline R. Kasun, p. 58). We are clearly in the realm of the right-wing conspiracy theorist, where environmentalists are “card carrying” (Robert H. Nelson, p. 159) similar to communists in the McCarthy era, government “coercion” (J.R. Clark and Dwight R. Lee, p. 100) is always expanding, and a constant vigilance is our first line of defense against “creeping” (Randal O’Toole, Chapter 15) or “stealth” (Roy E. Cordato, p. 372) socialism. All undiscovered, like Isaac Newton’s “Great Ocean of Truth”, is the role of the government and its agencies in leavening the excesses of capitalism and in safeguarding the public interest. On the contrary, the Environmental Protection Agency in the USA is emphatically attacked as a propaganda machine (Craig S. Marksens, Chapter 18), specifically with regard to its claims for the Clean Air Act. Considering the time and effort that the Bush Administration and industry activists have spent suborning the EPA’s mission to protect human health and safeguard the environment, I believe some criticism of the EPA’s performance is justified, but for reasons that Marksens would probably reject.

Against the paranoid, right-wing threnody of the book, the more sober parts of *Re-Thinking Green* seem genuinely subversive. For instance, tort law is not generally appreciated by conservatives because it involves “using the coercive power of government” (Peter Hill, p. 385). Yet, John Bratland (Chapter 14) believes that tort law has a legitimate role to play in holding developers responsible for restitution for the environmental damage they may cause. He discusses this in the context of the despoliation of coastal lands by oil spills and similar accidents.

There are other small nuggets in this cart-load of dross from The Independent Institute, but finding them involves the reader in an uncongenial exposure to rampant libertarians weeping, wailing and gnashing their teeth. What I find a little surprising is the preponderance of academics lured into burying their work in such a volume.

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